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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - Recent Threats to Freedom of the Press

REF: NAIROBI 2116

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Since the temporary ban of VOA's Somali Service by Puntland authorities in early October (reftel), Somali media have encountered a series of additional hardships. Independent media outlets have experienced closures, arrests, and violence. Among the most notable incidents was the shooting by Puntland authorities of a VOA Somali Service stringer in Puntland on November 17. Post remains fully engaged in advocating for a free and fair press in all parts of Somalia. End summary.

Problems from
Shabaab

¶2. (SBU) Since reftel reported on the temporary closure of VOA's Somali Service in early October, Somali media outlets have experienced a continuing series of threats to their ability to practice journalism freely and independently. Chief among those threats are the unabated efforts by al-Shabaab to either suppress media altogether or to gain control of existing outlets for use as Shabaab mouthpieces.

¶3. (SBU) On October 1, Abdi Nur Abdullahi Abdulle of Radio Voice of Mudug was arrested by Shabaab in Kismayo, a southern port city, which has been under Shabaab control for an extended period. Abdulle was reportedly arrested while covering fighting in Kismayo between Shabaab and rival Islamist group Hisb al-Islam.

¶4. (SBU) Al Shabaab ordered the closure of Baidoa's Radio Warsan and Radio Jubba on October 21, followed on November 1 by Shabaab's seizure of Radio Warsan, eviction of all staff, and arrest of editor Muhyadin Husni. According to Radio Jubba owner Abdi Azziz, who is resident in Denmark, Shabaab officials attempted to convince him to sell the station to them for USD 25,000. When Azziz refused, Shabaab seized the station by force. Azziz told us Shabaab would not let any outlet in Shabaab-controlled regions work independently or neutrally, and would attempt to force the private stations to broadcast reports favoring or promoting extremist agendas. Shabaab seized Radio Warsan and all of its equipment, but Azziz said that Radio Jubba management had managed to move most of their station's important equipment secretly to Mogadishu before the station was seized.

¶5. (SBU) On November 24, Shabaab closed Radio Mandeeg, in Gedo Region's Beled Hawa. The management of Radio Mandeeg are strong post contacts and have facilitated some of our outreach activity in Gedo Region and the bordering area of Kenya. A statement from a

journalist union indicated that Shabaab militia arrived at the station at about 1215 local time aboard two 'technicals' and, claiming to be acting on orders, demanded that the station be closed. Mandeeq had been previously forced to close in April 2009, reportedly as a result of al-Shabaab's displeasure over the station's reporting on a clan dispute. We are in close contact with Mandeeq's management.

Problems from
Authorities

¶6. (SBU) In an unusual cross-border scenario, Nuradin Ma'alín Muqtar, alias Dinow, was arrested on October 18 at an Internet cafe in Nairobi's predominantly Somali neighborhood of Eastleigh, possibly for a report implicating the director of the Mogadishu port in embezzlement. (Note: Another version has it that the Mogadishu port director or his allies alleged to the Kenyan authorities that Muqtar was a member of al-Shabaab, thus triggering his arrest. End note.) He was held for 24 hours and then released after advocacy from the Somali ambassador to Kenya and another well-known Somali reporter. Muqtar claimed he was arrested by Kenyan security officials at the instruction of the director of Mogadishu port, Abdi Jinow, who was then in Nairobi. Asked why the port director had called for his arrest, Muqtar said he had previously acted as a whistleblower, highlighting reports of corruption and embezzlement involving officials working at the port. He specifically mentioned two cases involving the port director: a case of a bullet-proof UNICEF vehicle that had been stolen by al-Shabaab during its capture of Jowhar, but then allegedly purchased by the director for USD

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150,000, and a second case involving houses bought by the director in Nairobi's exclusive Hurlingham neighborhood. The journalist said he made a comparison between the ongoing fight against corruption in Kenya, which is getting much attention from the international community, and the level of corruption existing in Mogadishu. Muqtar said that security personnel also questioned him at length about al-Shabaab and piracy activities in Somalia.

¶7. (SBU) ETN reporter Abdirahman Muhammad Muse was arrested and reportedly beaten on November 3 in Garowe. Muse claims he was covering a court session, although the ETN manager in Nairobi told us that the police arrested the reporter on suspicion that he was clandestinely filming a police operation.

¶8. (SBU) On November 5 in Mogadishu, AFP cameraman Mohamed Dahir and Universal TV cameraman Mahmud Muktar Kofi were detained, possibly by TFG authorities, and held for approximately 48 hours after filming African Union troops firing into Bakara Market. Reports indicate that Somali MPs intervened to secure their release.

¶9. (SBU) Muhammad Yasin Ishaq, a stringer for VOA's Somali Service, was shot and injured by Puntland police on November 24. Reports from VOA Somali Service and Ishaq himself indicate he was passing through a police checkpoint en route to the southern part of Galkayo. Some allege that Ishaq failed to stop at a checkpoint; others that he stopped and was purposely shot anyway. Some independent sources, including UN officials, say that the journalist passed the checkpoint without stopping and was fired upon by authorities, who were on high alert following an incident from the previous week when a hand grenade that was thrown from a passing vehicle wounded some of the security personnel. In a press release, VOA joined the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders in calling for an investigation.

Problems from
Somalia in General

¶10. (SBU) On the morning of November 18, Abdirahman Warsame, who reports for the Chinese news service Xinhua, was injured in Mogadishu fighting. He was reportedly standing in front of Banadir Hospital in Mogadishu when he was hit by a stray bullet.

¶11. (SBU) As has been widely reported, Canadian journalist Amanda Lindhout and Australian photographer Nigel Brennan were released on November 25 after being kidnapped and held for approximately 15 months.

Post's Continued
Advocacy

¶12. (SBU) Post remains fully engaged in aiding the media in Somalia. We maintain strong relationships with most media houses, which allow us to get accurate information quickly in the event of an incident, and we intercede with the authorities, where possible.

¶13. (SBU) We have also encouraged the TFG to be more vocal about freedom of press issues. An October 24 statement condemning the closures of Radios Warsan and Jubba was issued immediately by the TFG after Somalia Unit suggested to the Minister of Information that the TFG speak out publicly.

RANNEBERGER